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ABSTRACT

Preventive consultation, rather than focusing on individuals or specific problems, focuses on the environmental factors within a social setting that contribute to the incidence and prevalence of a specific problem. The ecological paradigm is a useful assessment for directing the design of a preventive consultation. The design focuses on the life enhancing conditions of the setting as they relate to how internal and external resources are being used. The preventive consultant works with the social environment to identify qualities that will promote a milieu for preventive intervention and to create a milieu that will enable members to manage resources and develop competencies. The social setting is assessed for the diversity of member competencies, informal social ties, and the occasions, activities, and events where the social norms of the organization are revised. Organizational resources,(i.e., members' commitment to change, linkage to external resources, and the available means to reduce tension), are assessed through interviews. Diversity of competencies is assessed through observation of informal social settings. Formal and informal processes are used to allow competent members to both receive and contribute resources. By focusing the preventive consultation assessment on these elements, the proposed consultative service will be imbedded in a supportive environment, which will better ensure its acceptance by the setting members. (BL)

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ASSESSING SOCIAL SETTINGS TO DESIGN A PREVENTIVE CONSULTATION

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Assessing Social Settings to Design a Preventive Consultation

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A typical client perception is that the consultant brings techniques and methods to treat or solve an immediate individual problem e.g., absenteeism, low self-esteem, alcoholism, physical abuse, anxiety over imposed organizational changes, etc. Preventive consultations, in contrast, neither focus only on individuals, nor just on an immediate problem but on the environmental factors within a social setting that contribute to the incidence and prevalence of a specific problem. Attending to environmental factors rather than to the plight of individuals involves new topics of assessment and a new style of work.

The ecological paradigm is proposed as a useful assessment approach for directing the design of a preventive consultation (Kelly, 1979; Kelly, 1983). The premise of the ecological paradigm is that if the qualities of the social environment can be improved, presenting symptoms expressed by individuals can be reduced (Trickett, Kelly, & Vincent, in press). The ecological paradigm defines the preventive consultant as a resource for the development of the entire social setting, not just as an expert to apply techniques to one isolated event or condition.

The ecological paradigm by emphasizing assessment of the total social setting increases opportunities to design a consultation that focuses upon critical life enhancing conditions of the setting. These life enhancing

conditions are expected to relate to how resources are being used within the setting. Typical presenting problems of the setting are conceptualized to mean that available internal resources are not being used efficiently, or there are undeveloped relationships with outside resources. In an effort to focus upon these life enchancing conditions, the consultation effort, stimulated by the ecological paradigm, aspires to be preventive, e.g., to increase the management and conservation of resources.

Three axioms of the paradigm are salient for the assessment of social settings:

1. Each social setting has a finite number of resources to maintain and expand the organization and to recruit and develop new members.
2. An adaptive environment has members who have a diversity of competences.
3. The purpose of a preventive intervention is to preserve resources and develop competences.

A preventive consultant working from this paradigm focuses upon the total configuration of the social setting because it is the context that is actually its own reservoir for change. The consultant works with the social environment to: (1) identify qualities that will promote a milieu for the preventive intervention; (2) create a milieu that enables members of the setting to manage setting resources and develop members' competences. The goal of the preventive consultation is to solve a presenting problem by using the resources within the social setting and at the same time to set in motion a basis for long term change by promoting and cultivating resources. The preventive consultant makes explicit the expectation that the

participants have the potential to identify and manage the needed resources to implement programs that will improve the quality of life within their particular social setting.

The three qualities of the social setting, which the consultant attends to, in order to reach these goals, are: (1) The Diversity of Competences Possessed by Members; (2) The Informal Social Ties Expressed in Natural Settings; (3) The Social Occasions, Activities and Events Where Members Revise the Social Norms of the Organization.

The initial task then of the preventive consultant is to assess a social setting in terms of its capacity to host the consultation program and to be a resource for its own future development. Here are some brief comments about three assessment activities to guide the design of a preventive consultation program. While each of the three assessment activities are carried out simultaneously, they are presented here in the preferred sequence to represent the natural process of doing consultation.

I. Identifying Resources Available Within the Social Setting and Clarifying How These Resources Are Tangibly Supported

In the early development of mental health consultation techniques, Gerald Caplan observed that the first client requesting help from a consultant is likely to be a deviant member of the particular social setting (Caplan, 1964). If the consultant, so Caplan stated, focuses time and energy exclusively upon the needs of this initial deviant client, then unwittingly, the consultant has less access to other resources within the social setting. In my personal experience, Gerald's observation is a law! The ecological paradigm affirms this law by proposing the assessment of the

maximum number of resources of the organization. In designing a preventive consultation it is essential to determine whether the primary host setting has the latent resources to carry out a preventive program. While many social settings have social structures available to develop and manage technical resources (e.g., budgetary committees, recruitment committees), the interpersonal resources needed to design and implement preventive programs are often unnoticed, not understood, or not available.

Three concepts presented by John Glidewell are very useful for the assessment of these organizational resources (Glidewell, 1976). Glidewell identified three factors as essential for induced social change - members' commitment to change, members' linkage to outside resources, and available means within the setting to reduce tension. These concepts provide a fruitful agenda for the initial assessment. The consultant then looks for persons in different social status groupings who express a value for personal renewal, who self-consciously appreciate and seek out linkages to resources in other social settings, and, in various ways, help to manage the day to day interpersonal tensions. Each of these concepts are important for two essential tasks of the setting: maintenance of productivity and enhancement of morale. In addition to the three factors articulated by Glidewell, other potentially salient questions are: 1) who supports young/new members of the organization? 2) Which persons work to create a socially supportive milieu? and 3) Who are the people who provide autonomy for other members? Other examples of resources can be: persons who develop social norms for members' maximum participation in decision making, or persons who work so that gender, ethnic, and socio-economic discrimination is minimal. Without an initial assessment of the specific types of

resources available within an organization, it is not possible for the preventive consultant to create a work plan for the proposed preventive consultation. That is, without this type of reconnaisance, the potential of the organization to host a preventive consultation will not be apparent.

An explicit process for doing the assessment is essential. The consultant will spend substantial time in meeting and talking with representatives of all levels and all primary units of the organization. While doing so the consultant can locate persons who express the above qualities described above through observation or soliciting nominations from key members of the setting. The process of following a "chain" of nominations, gives the consultant an opportunity to help the persons who express these qualities become more visible and acknowledged within the setting. At the same time as the consultant is creating a psychologically resourceful environment, he/she can be educating all members of the setting about the values and frame of reference of the ecological point of view. In carrying out this task, the consultant relates professionally, yet informally in a non-threatening manner. When performed well this assessment task can become a "watershed" for implementing a future preventive intervention.

II. Locating Social Settings Where Diverse Competences Are Expressed

Diversity of competences are expected to increase the range of alternative resources that the organization can draw upon when responding to unpredictable, unplanned external events. The initial task of the consultant is to identify how the diversity of competences is expressed in this particular social setting. The task of identifying the resources

discussed under the first topic can be carried out in confidential, informal conversations. The assessment of this second topic, diversity of competences, is assessed by observations of participants. It is the observation of informal social settings, unencumbered by the direct expression of prescribed roles for either the consultant or consultee, that makes it possible for competences to be spontaneously expressed and then acknowledged.

To develop an awareness of the expression of diverse competences in social settings, the consultant can take advantage of opportunities to be a participant in those specific places where informal social interaction occurs. For example, in an elementary school it could be the office of the school secretary or principal, or the teacher's lounge, or various halls and playgrounds. In a fire house, it could be the kitchen. In a large office building cafeterias, bulletin board areas, newspaper and candy counters, lounges, shoeshine stands, lavatories, etc., can serve as these settings. In addition to these relatively structured settings, the consultant can benefit from taking part in social gatherings, such as having drinks after work at a pub, anniversary celebrations, birthday parties, and by observing competitive team sports between various subunits of the organization. The goal of all of these participant observations is to identify members of the organization, who manifest a variety of interpersonal skills beyond their technical occupation skills. It is the interpersonal skills that contribute to the resource portfolio of the organization. Examples of such interpersonal competences are: building of morale; directly expressing caring about the needs of other persons; performing distinctly different roles than expected by the employer; interelating with others across role,

sex, status boundaries; and generating and expressing perceptions about organizational needs. These observations can pinpoint which members of the social setting have committed their energy (resources) to developing the social settings into places where these skills can be defined, nutured, and expressed. Such observations are made by the consultant being enmeshed in the life of the setting. It is also important to observe cliques -- both cliques that are operating in positive ways and cliques that are operating to block off informal connections and linkages among members of the organization. Because cliques can cement and protect the status quo, it is essential that the consultant take note of the range and functions of cliques.

There are two advantages when the consultant participates in social settings. First, through such participation, the participants can come to see the consultant as a personally engaged resource who expresses his or her own professional competences and his/her unique interpersonal skills. One of the easiest ways for consultants' own diversity of competences to be expressed is for the consultant to talk about his/her own hobbies and leisure activities so that the members of the setting can relate to the consultant in a personal and informal manner. The second advantage of participating in natural settings is that the consultant can identify how persons previously identified as resources during the first assessment process actually function in a variety of social settings. A corollary of the three axioms presented at the beginning of this paper is that the social setting which has clearly identifiable resources and whose members express a diversity of competences in natural settings has the capacity to be a resource for its own development. Carrying out the assessment of

competences in natural settings makes it possible for the consultant to generate valid data and makes the diagnostic/entry task more authentic, more grounded, more involving, and potentially more fun. This ecological style of consulting also communicates to the consultee that the task of organizational change is not mysterious or esoteric. It involves a realistic appraisal of limiting conditions and potential resources, while building a working environment of trust and hope.

III. Assessing the Relationship Between Power and Competences

The first activity, through interviews, focuses upon the quantity, quality, and distribution of resources within the organization. The second activity, via participant observations, makes it possible to assess ways in which the competences of members of the organization are displayed within the natural settings of the organization. The third assessment activity is a difficult activity, because it is designed to assess the subtle ways in which power and influence are expressed within the organization. Do the persons with access to financial and influence resources (who have power) acknowledge the competence of others who may not have equal access to resources at the present time? An ecological assessment for a preventive intervention focuses upon the process that the setting uses to allow competent people, independent of their longevity within the organization, their social status, their gender or ethnicity, to both receive and contribute resources. The assessment task at entré is to determine the formal and informal policies for distributing resources. The consultant defines the assessment contract to secure access to all levels of decision making within the organization. The consultant works to secure access to

those occasions and social settings where decisions are made. Without access to the settings where decisions are made, it will be very difficult to identify how social influence is exerted within the organization. The pivotal issue is how the use of power is expressed. That is whether or not competent persons: (a) receive resources, (b) are equal participants in decision making about resources, and (c) are involved in planning for the acquisition of resources.

In carrying out these observations, the consultant works carefully to arrange meetings, with key persons chairing decision making occasions both before and after the decision making occasions. The consultant also gives direct feedback regarding perceived discrepancies between the concentration of resources and the competence of members. The consultant also explicitly points out how decision making activities impact upon the quality of life of the social setting. A successful preventive consultation depends upon the activation of policies that support the autonomy, self-fullfillment, and equal opportunities for members. The organization which has public forums for decision making, and a socially supportive environment where participants have explicit access to resources is expected to be a social setting that is a positive resource for development. The consultant is a tangible role model for illustrating how goals of preventive programs can be realized. It is the consultant's own behavior, modeling the values of the ecological paradigm, that enables the rationale and goal of the preventive program to be made explicit and put in operation.

Conclusion

By emphasizing the relationship between power and competences, the

consultant makes an assessment for a preventive consultation program so that the proposed preventive service will be imbedded in a supportive environment. Without a supportive environment, externally generated interventions are expected to fail, or have a very short life history.

These introductory comments focus upon three essential topics for the assessment of the adaptive capacity of a social setting for hosting a preventive program. These three topics are presented to help answer this question, "Can this social setting be an active host for a preventive program?"

The three topics frame the asessment task of determining how the distribution of resources is related to the expression of competences in social settings. In addition, the consultant attends to how concrete procedures used by the organization define and support the acquisition and maintenance of resources and competences. This assessment provides the basic data for choosing the content and the target for the preventive consultation.

Reference Notes

[1]This paper was presented at a symposium "The Ecoloical Paradigm: The Design of Preventive Consultation Services", at the 91st annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, California, August 28, 1983.

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